

# Professional Learning Communities and the Eight-Year Study

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by Robert V. Bullough, Jr.

## Introduction

Increasingly, educational reform is linked to the concept of professional learning communities (PLCs). Definitions of PLCs vary, but generally the concept refers to a group of educators who “continuously seek and share learning, and act on their learning” (Hord 1997, 6). The goal is to make educators more effective through “continuous inquiry and improvement” (*ibid.*). Central to this effort is gathering and acting upon data (DuFour 2005) and building a culture that supports continuous inquiry. The essential features of such a culture and community have been summarized by Stoll et al. (2006) as including “shared beliefs and understandings; interaction and participation; interdependence; concern for individual and minority views . . . ; and meaningful relationships” (p. 225). Such conditions benefit children and educators with sustained support and growth.

Stoll and her colleagues, concluding their review of the current state of PLCs and research, observe that there is a “paucity of longitudinal research” and that “little is yet known about the potential for establishing enduringly effective PLCs” (p. 247). The concept, they conclude, is new, and much work is needed to develop and then test its potential. Although the phrase “professional learning community” is novel, the concept certainly is not new. (Editor’s note: the fall 2005 issue of *Educational Horizons* examined one version of PLCs, the Critical Friends Groups.) As researchers study PLCs to gain greater insight into their problems and possibilities, this article recalls an often-forgotten and consistently misrepresented moment in the history of American education: the Eight-Year Study, during which such communities formed and flourished. The history of PLCs, most recently described in *Stories of the Eight-Year Study: Reexamining Secondary Education in America* (Kridel and Bullough 2007), sheds light on current efforts to devise new tools for school reform.

## The Eight-Year Study: An Unfolding Idea and Approach to Innovation

Seldom have teachers and pupils been given such opportunities . . . to work together. . . . It remains to be seen whether teachers can realize the new opportunities for their own growth which progressive education offers them. (Denver Public Schools 1936, 44)

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Sponsored by the Progressive Education Association (PEA), the Eight-Year Study (which actually ran for twelve years, 1930 to 1942—“eight-year” referred to the time spent in secondary school and college) began with two goals: “To establish a relationship between school and college that would permit and encourage reconstruction in the secondary school” and “[t]o find, through exploration and experimentation, how the high school in the United States can serve youth more effectively” (Aikin 1942, 116). The widely shared view was that the prevailing college admission standards made innovation in secondary schools impossible, even if badly needed given the era’s rapidly changing social conditions. Under Wilford M. Aikin, a school headmaster, the PEA established the Commission on the Relation of School and College to address the problem (Aikin 1942). Funded first by the Carnegie Foundation and then the General Education Board, the commission would bring together educators from universities and secondary schools to examine the relationship between postsecondary and secondary education and to engage in school experimentation. Plans were made to enable roughly thirty schools (some were school systems) to experiment with their programs. Eventually, 284 colleges agreed to suspend established admissions requirements for five years in favor of alternative forms of documentation provided by the participating schools.

No specific program or curricular design was set out in advance; instead, school faculties were expected to experiment with the curriculum. The schools differed dramatically. Because of Carnegie influence, some were elite private institutions whose faculties had little interest in innovation. Others were large public school systems, including the schools of Tulsa and Denver, whose faculties were eager to reconsider traditional curricular assumptions.

During the early years of the study, school faculties and study leaders felt their way along. They began to understand schooling and the challenges of change in new and unanticipated ways. Initially, the directing committee assumed that merely freeing schools from college-admission standards would produce an outpouring of program innovation. What committee members discovered, however, was that change would come slowly, if at all. Encountering what Tyack and Cuban (1995) would

later describe as the “grammar of schooling,” they gradually realized that school conditions, culture, and customary practices all stifled innovation. Teachers also often resisted change. In the summer of 1935, for instance, one school director complained that within many of the schools he saw only “ineffective ‘tinkering’ with the traditional college entrance requirements” (Denver Public Schools 1936, 115). Teachers seemed to “mistrust the freedom provided by the new requirements for college entrance” (*ibid.*, 114). Such conclusions were echoed by the General Education Board’s Robert Havighurst, who wrote in his diary that “the teachers of the thirty schools have been slow in making curricular changes” (Havighurst 1936, 3). Nonetheless, a few participating schools were making remarkable headway (Commission on the Relation of School and College 1943, 483–493).

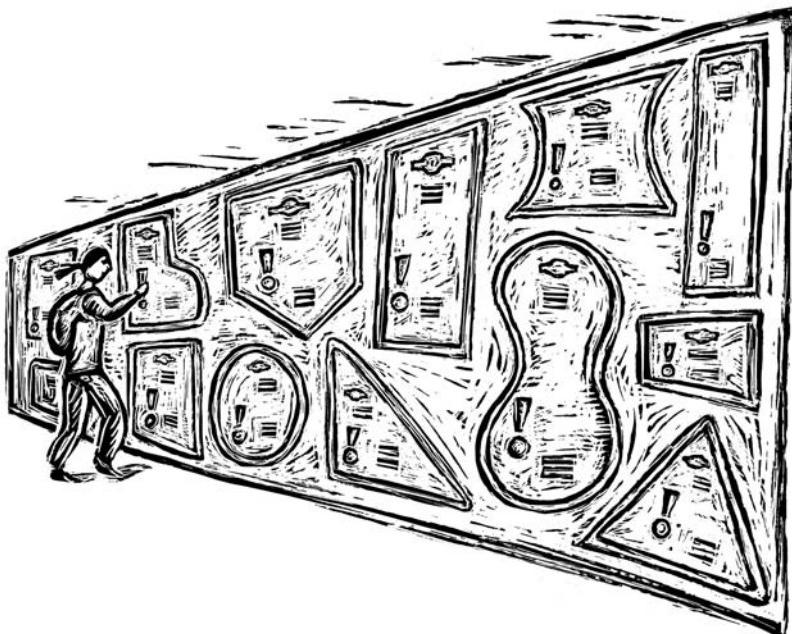
### Changing Teacher Roles

As the study proceeded, the role of the teachers became increasingly complex, as it does in PLCs (Fleming and Thompson 2004). New tasks called for developing new abilities and setting aside old habits. No challenge was more difficult or threatening than developing a commitment to democratic social ideals and a curriculum that reflected those values. The commitment to democracy as a fundamental aim and focus grew slowly, paralleling the social upheavals of deepening economic depression and rising European fascism and Soviet communism. Linking the future of democracy to schooling was common in the American mind, but beyond making schooling available to every child free of charge, comparatively little thinking had weighed its programmatic and instructional implications. A member of the directing committee put the charge succinctly: in the quest to form “democracy as a way of life,” the pupil must be brought

back into the picture. After all he is the leading figure in the play. He is the future citizen, who will have to deal with all the desperate problems which we seem unable to solve and which are bound to constitute a part of our legacy to him. . . . He is entitled to have all the light that the school can furnish on underlying issues and he should have opportunity for the exercise of enlightened and independent judgment. (Bode 1937, 97–98)

To this end, faculties within the more-experimental programs began to develop working philosophies, each unique but centered on life in a democratic society, a view later described by Hullfish and Smith (1961) as involving “a distinctive way of coming at life” (p. 261). Over time, virtually every aspect of the school day was reconsidered. Producing these documents proved profoundly important to building a sense of belonging and direction among staff members, whose debates were often heated.

To achieve citizenship aims, several schools' core programs integrated the disciplines with various topics, problems, or student needs and emphasized teacher-pupil planning (Giles 1941; Giles, McCutchen, and Zechiel 1942). Educators in Denver, Tulsa, and Des Moines developed small schools ("Little Schools" in Tulsa), usually composed of just a few classes, within the larger public schools. Core teachers, inevitably confronting limitations in their content knowledge, found themselves dependent on other teachers. In addition, as in the core program at the Ohio State University School, teachers were challenged not only to work in new ways with other teachers but also to foster new and more-complicated relationships with students: "The role of the teacher has changed from guide of a conducted tour to guide of a group of explorers. The trend is in the direction of democratic leadership on the part of teachers" (Commission on the Relation of School and College 1943, 724). In the more-experimental schools, teacher-pupil planning became a central part of teaching; content could not be set out in detail in advance. As schoolteachers more and more found themselves called upon to participate in policy discussions and program reform, administrators began to grapple with the implications of democracy as a guiding philosophy of education. Teacher study groups and curriculum councils became common practices, with decentralization of authority and new responsibilities delegated to teachers.



Relationships between teachers and students and between school administrators and teachers changed. In several schools, the transmission approach to teaching gave way to more-interactive approaches; guidance became part of teachers' responsibilities; and leadership opportunities, for both teachers and students, expanded dramatically. These changes were evident in the participating schools of Tulsa: "The teacher is no longer the classroom drill master. He is most interested in the personal supervision and encouragement of pupil growth. The emphasis in the classroom is all on the pupil" (Moran 1940, 130).

Because textbooks no longer constituted a reliable basic curriculum, teachers found themselves searching for new materials, organized in new ways:

The old security of set subject matter in required textbooks with definite pages of information to be covered every day has been removed from the teacher of a progressive education class. The old refuges of pure memory work and disciplinary subjects have been torn away. (Denver Public Schools 1936, 44)

For both teachers and students, moving away from reliance on textbooks proved difficult. Part of the solution was found in the concept of resource units (Alberty 1947), thematic organizations of materials developed by teachers to facilitate planning. Given these demands, new forms of teacher and school assistance were required.

## **Evolution of the Study**

The schools' need for assistance in curriculum development soon became apparent. To this end, study leaders formed the Commission on Secondary School Curriculum in 1933 and chose V. T. Thayer, a participating school headmaster, as director. In a series of volumes written with significant teacher involvement, this commission developed an approach, centered on social and personal concepts of adolescent needs, for reorganizing general education in the various disciplines. Although some teachers embraced the view developed by Thayer's commission, the reports, consistent with study aims, were mere guides to innovation. As such, the schools confronted the difficulty of transforming reports into an actual implemented curriculum. To address this issue and provide support to teachers accustomed to working alone within particular disciplines, a group of "Curriculum Associates" with expertise in the various subject areas was appointed in 1936. Operating roughly like the "external facilitators" discussed by Cowan and Pankake (2004), who work from "best guess" (p. 69), the curriculum associates visited each school and, working only as requested, assisted the various departments with curriculum development and integration.

The associates' support proved invaluable to curriculum reform. A Commission on the Study of Adolescents was formed under the direction of Caroline Zachry to generate materials and explore methods, including case studies and case-study analysis, of helping teachers better understand adolescents for both instructional and curricular purposes (Blos 1941; Zachry 1940). At about the same time, the third organizational component of the study, the Commission on Human Relations, was established to study problems faced by young people and to create instructional materials, including the then-innovative use of motion pictures.

Both the Commission on Secondary School Curriculum and the Commission on Human Relations formed evaluation committees to develop means of data gathering that would guide program development and teacher decision-making as well as judge study results. In 1934 Ralph Tyler was appointed to lead the Committee on Evaluation for the entire study. The new committee quickly organized to assist faculties in clarifying their own assessment purposes: aims set by the participating schools would drive evaluation. The intent from the beginning was to gather data of many kinds thought useful for informed decision-making: data on not only academic performance but also school activities of students, their interests, and their concerns. The efforts of the evaluation committee encouraged and focused discussion on school philosophy and on making purposes clear. This work was further encouraged by a series of study-sponsored meetings and six-week-long summer workshops, an idea first implemented at Ohio State University in 1936 and quickly expanded (Heaton, Camp, and Diederich 1940).

The workshops began as an experiment to "test the hypothesis that a group of teachers can work with each other and the members of a highly accessible staff upon problems growing out of their separate situations" (Griffin 1941, 122). Within the workshops, which were initially led by commission staff, teachers were joined by university faculty, including distinguished social scientists; together they worked on problems teachers brought from their various settings—subject-specific curriculum, instruction, evaluation, and test construction, among other topics. Eventually various schools sent "teacher delegations" that they hoped would return to involve and support other teachers in inquiry. These teachers proved so enthusiastic about their mission that "when the first Denver workshop was formed in the summer of 1938 the attendance from Denver was large, sixty-seven in all, including both junior and senior high school teachers and administrators" (Denver Public Schools 1941, 145). A few of the teachers became staff members at later workshops. Across the settings, teachers, administrators, and staff shared promising developments at association-sponsored meetings and summer workshops. Each step in the

organization of the study was unprecedented. Nothing of this scope or with this purpose had ever occurred in American education.

## Data and Decision-making

Throughout the history of the Eight-Year Study, appraisal and evaluation were tightly linked to diagnosis, program development, and clarification of program purposes. Contrary to much current practice, the variety of data gathered shed light on various aspects of student development. In fact, when it appeared in 1934 that the Carnegie Foundation's interest in standardized testing might shift the study's focus from curriculum development, several school heads and teachers revolted—arguing not against testing *per se*, but its narrow focus on traditional content. The protest favored a more-generous view of assessment, one that focused on student attitudes, beliefs, and values as well as academic performance.

This more generous view, championed by Ralph Tyler, was evident in the evaluation committee's work. Deemphasizing reliability, Tyler and his staff supported experimentation and implementative research, in which each school functioned as a demonstration site on its own terms and in accord with its own problems and opportunities. Evaluation could be reasonably objective and accurate, but the results were not wholly transferable or replicable. Hence, Tyler argued for the value of validity over reliability. Years later, Tyler referred to these efforts as a form of "action research." In addition and in contrast to the views of several prominent testing experts of the time, Tyler argued that teachers were fully capable of developing valid assessment instruments and warned against overreliance on test "technicians" who knew little about content and less about the challenges of schooling. Teachers, he thought (and the study proved), could not only effectively gather and use data to support systematic change but also do so with skill and intelligence. Lacking such involvement, Tyler thought, assessment would inevitably go awry—as many believe it has.

## Teacher Growth and School Experimentation

Tyler's evaluation staff was organized to support school experimentation, but so was virtually every other aspect of the study. As noted, no specific outcome other than curriculum redesign was sought. Participants understood that quality programs depended completely on quality teachers, an insight that only recently has been appreciated: school reform involves teacher development, and that necessitates creating conditions supportive of teacher growth (see *Educational Horizons*, fall 2005).

The conditions necessary for teacher growth paralleled those required for school experimentation. Leadership in the study was widely shared, and teachers, often for the first time, received significant

responsibilities for determining the aims as well as the means of education. The more-experimental programs involved teachers in virtually every educational decision of consequence. Perhaps most important, educators determined which problems to study and engaged in data-driven cycles of reflection and action, often with the support of study staff. School heads engaged in less formal administration and more faculty development. Teachers were trusted to formulate issues for study and, as within the workshops, to carry those studies to a conclusion. Additionally, teachers taught other teachers and worked together on committees formed to test and disseminate ideas. Every faculty was assumed to possess sufficient talent and skill to produce an extraordinary program, and in most schools that assumption proved correct. Teacher participation in the workshops made the point. Teachers were not paid nor did they receive credit for their six weeks of summer work, but they came in large and growing numbers. When time restraints interfered with experimentation, new accommodations, even in the largest participating public schools, allowed teachers to work together during the school day—despite large class sizes, frequently approaching fifty students in the public schools, and severe economic restraints.

### **Traveling “With Adventurous Company”**

There was, across the study, a sense of adventure. Teachers, school heads, and other participants could profit from abundant opportunities to push the boundaries of their knowledge and skills and to reconsider the purposes of their work in light of democratic social commitments. Such opportunities, however, were not limited to those directly and obviously tied to increasing student performance. Rather, the view of teacher development was generous, suggesting a rich and broad conception of teaching, one that went well beyond common craft or technical definitions:

[T]he first requirement for growth of teachers through any means is that they work under conditions which are favorable to their growth as persons, and that to be a good teacher one must be first of all a good human being. (Giles, McCutchen, and Zechiel 1942, 231)

The view was that because teaching demands everything of teachers, investment in their entire beings, investment in the teacher as a person, was understood to be an investment in student learning as well. This insight was bolstered by an event that took place at the Sarah Lawrence Workshop in 1937. Because the campus of Sarah Lawrence College was relatively secluded, all participants were involved in workshop activities from early morning until late at night. Everyone lived and dined together on campus, and leisure hours encouraged informal as

well as formal discussions among those attending. Participants realized that “learning was taking place at the breakfast table as well as in the conference room or library and that the variety of associations was adding to the enrichment of [their] personal as well as the professional life” (Heaton, Camp, and Diederich 1940, 7). Plans were made so that in subsequent workshops, conditions would exist for maximizing informal interaction, leisure activity, and involvement in the arts. The importance of this development became apparent the next year when, at the Rocky Mountain Workshop, “75 percent of [participants] said the most helpful feature [of the workshop] was the ‘unusual opportunity for personal contact’” (Ryan and Tyler 1939, 22). For core teachers, these developments were especially significant: the nature of interdisciplinary work requires a lively mind and the ability to make connections across subject-area lines as well as the ability to connect with other teachers.

## **Dimensions of Professional Learning Communities and the Eight-Year Study**

Researchers associated with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory have identified five “dimensions” of professional learning communities, including “supportive and shared leadership, shared values and vision, collective learning and application of that learning, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice” (Hord 2004, 1). Considering those dimensions in relation to the Eight-Year Study underscores how the study anticipated PLCs and also reveals potential areas of concern or weakness that could affect their further development.

The Eight-Year Study brought together university and school faculty and provided opportunities for *shared leadership*, the first dimension of PLCs. Evidence is abundant that throughout the study’s life, teachers came to hold increasingly influential positions, not only within the schools but also within activities sponsored by the Progressive Education Association. Focus on building *shared values and vision* is also evident, but considering this dimension points toward a potential concern. Reviews of the research and practice of PLCs (Stoll et al. 2006; Hord 2004) reveal surprisingly little attention given to the sort of social philosophy that characterized the Eight-Year Study. Rather, questions of social aims are now apparently taken as achieved when sufficient measured evidence of student performance is provided. This absence raises potentially serious issues: Learning to what ends, for what purposes? Short of a clearly articulated social philosophy, upon what basis are curriculum decisions being made? (Test scores?) How does one know that the most important aims are being achieved? Obviously students learn both more and less than what is directly taught in school. Participants in the Eight-Year Study understood that and sought to build school programs that

both directly and indirectly helped realize citizenship aims. The learning community that resulted was understood as an idealized reflection of the life that all citizens in a democracy could live, teachers and students included.

*Collective learning and application* requires that “school staff at all levels are engaged in processes that collectively seek new knowledge among staff and application of the learning to solutions that address students’ needs” (Hord 2004). Conversations about teaching should be common, and inquiry into practice widespread. As noted, participants in the Eight-Year Study continually studied their practice, whether to create a core curriculum or to assess the quality of student learning. With assistance, teachers developed instruments to collect data on issues and problems and then used the data for decision-making. School districts supported those efforts at every level, from school curriculum and evaluation committees to workshop participation. Ironically, a central consideration was how to define “need” and determine a legitimate standard for a claim on school resources. That consideration, of course, returns us to questions of social philosophy. Perhaps most important, the most experimental Eight-Year Study schools were not only (or merely) interested in addressing student needs but also in creating them to make student, and teacher, life richer and more interesting. Needs were viewed not only as deficiencies, a point of view inherent in the above-quoted description of this PLC dimension, but also as possibilities with real consequences.

*Supportive conditions* includes the “physical conditions and human capacities that encourage and sustain a collegial atmosphere and collective learning” (Hord 2004). Given the economic situation of the 1930s, it is remarkable that adjustments in teachers’ work were made in some schools, even though, comparatively speaking, the changes were relatively modest compared to what is now possible. Initially, the issue went unrecognized by the directing committee, but over time it grew in consequence. “Human capacities” include trust, respect, and a willingness to “accept feedback and work toward improvement” (*ibid.*, 10). Despite initial resistance and suspicion, especially from on-site teachers not directly involved in the study, growth in trust and teacher capacity was reported at most schools. A distinctive feature of the Eight-Year Study is the high value placed on investment in teacher learning, broadly conceived (as noted in connection with the Sarah Lawrence workshop). That focus represents a more expansive conception of a learning community and its purposes than commonly assumed in the PLC literature.

*Shared practice* involves teachers’ engagement in one another’s classroom practice. The notion is that colleagues assist colleagues to improve. Teachers working in Eight-Year Study schools, particularly core teachers, often invited other teachers to work with the students in their

classrooms. Although there is no direct evidence that teachers engaged in criticism and feedback of one another's practice, it is reasonable to assume that such conversations took place. The organization of the study provided abundant opportunities for teachers to discuss their practice and to learn from one another, but given the working conditions, actual observations in the classrooms of participating teachers would have been very difficult at best.

### **Conclusion: Overcoming the Hurdles of Reform**

Five lessons of importance to school reform emerge from this inquiry into the Eight-Year Study and PLCs. The first is the most important and perhaps least appreciated: school reform consists of teacher education and capacity building (Kridel and Bullough 2007). A second lesson is only now being rediscovered: powerful teacher education is more than a matter of learning about and practicing promising teaching techniques; it involves engagement in exploring, with others, pressing personal and professional problems and issues—the sorts of issues that now form the focus of the teacher-researcher movement. A third lesson underpins the first two: sustained school reform will require both a foundation of trust among teachers and life-enhancing relationships with one another and with young people. When the novelist James Michener, a teacher at one of the Eight-Year Study schools, reflected on the criticisms of progressive education, he underscored this aspect of teacher growth:

A failure? [My teaching was] one of the greatest successes I've known. As to the effect on me: it made me a liberal, a producer, a student of my world, a man with a point of view and the courage to exemplify it. I wish all students could have the experiences mine did. I wish all teachers could know the joy I found in teaching under such conditions. (1986)

The meetings and workshops of the Eight-Year Study provided resources and support teachers needed to tackle compelling problems and issues in ways that deepened understanding, broadened perspective, enabled personal growth, and built community.

A fourth lesson emerges: powerful teacher education requires that schools, colleges, and universities join in a mutual quest for change and improvement. School faculties, however, must be wary of the university's intentions. Ironically, the Eight-Year Study was undertaken initially to free secondary education from the constraints of university admissions requirements. In the end, the grammar of university-based teacher education coopted the radical educative potential of the workshops. It is

this danger that makes the aim of “simultaneous renewal” of schools and teacher education institutions difficult.

Finally, a fifth lesson: the story of the Eight-Year Study is one of uncertain but thoughtful educational experimentation, of testing ideas, of gathering data, and of remaining open to contrary evidence in the hope and the belief that interesting, if inevitably temporary, solutions would be found to situation-specific problems. Tyack and Cuban would support this view and add:

Better schooling will result in the future—as it has in the past and does now—chiefly from the steady, reflective efforts of the practitioners who work in schools and from the contributions of the parents and citizens who support (while they criticize) public education. (1995, 135)

In this process, each generation needs to learn from the experience of previous generations.

Ours is a faithless time, when threats, punishments, and externally imposed mandates are thought necessary to produce desired reforms. Such approaches to fostering change misunderstand teachers and especially what inspires them to extraordinary levels of performance. Reforms driven by distrust cannot endure, nor can they produce sustainable quality programs. Able teachers flee from working under such conditions. Like the Eight-Year Study, PLCs seek to build teacher strength and to get motivation right. Insofar as they do, they represent a ray of hope for a brighter future.

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